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ABSTRACT

A remedial-English pilot program for college freshmen yielded four major observations about basic writers: they are poor readers, their level of syntactic maturity is low, their writing is riddled with errors, and the strategies they use in their writing often work against them to compound their difficulties. Among the conclusions drawn from these observations and from the program results are that reading and writing instruction should be united in the remedial classroom, that the tendency of some remedial programs to reduce the reading level of all materials to a low level may actually deter students from expanding their current capacities, that available sentence-combining exercises and other exercises designed to foster syntactic growth must be carefully redesigned for basic-writing students, and that basic-writing students can improve measurably in basic-skill areas if focus is directed toward meeting their individual needs. (GW)

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What We Know -- and Don't Know -- About Remedial Writing

Andrea A. Lunsford

What we do not know about remedial writers -- their processes and strategies and stages of development -- so far outstrips what we do know that I almost hesitate to include the "what we know" in my title. In her bibliographical article on remedial writing in Gary Tate's Teaching Composition and, most recently, in a talk presented at the 1976 MLA meeting, Mina Shaughnessy has charted the vast regions of what we do not know. In the MLA talk, she outlined four areas that badly need our attention: (1) identifying the stages of growth in writing; (2) finding appropriate ways to teach the subskills of writing; (3) identifying and analyzing those skills most necessary for academic writing; and (4) determining what goes on and what ought to go on in the composition classroom.

To these "unknown" areas we could add many others, foremost among them the relationship between the development of reading skills and the development of syntactic maturity; the relationship between the development of complex and relatively sophisticated sentence structures and the development of the ability to conceptualize and

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to draw inferences from data of varying complexity; and the relationship of individual cognitive styles to growth in writing skills.

What I have just outlined could fill a lifetime of work for an army of pedagogical researchers and thinkers -- and I must admit that more often than not the awesomeness of the tasks before us overwhelms me. But in the 1977 CCCC Keynote address, Robert Hogan reminded us that "it is better to light one little candle," and surely it is not unreasonable to expect that the light from an increasing number of little candles may begin to illuminate even the darkest recesses of our lack of knowledge. Some such candles, of course, are already shining -- in the work of Janet Emig on the writing process, in the work of Mina Shaughnessy and a host of her colleagues in the CUNY system, in the work Richard Bossone and Lynn Troyka have done toward understanding why our efforts with remedial writers have so often failed, or David Bartholomae at Pittsburgh toward establishing successful teaching models for remedial writing.

These teachers, researchers, and writers have shown us that what we know about what we do in the teaching of remedial writing is expanding, and they have called for others to join in establishing a tradition of careful observation of student development and cumulative publication of what we learn about and from these students. With this call in mind, I developed a pilot program in remedial English at the Ohio State University. Now that the program has been completed, I would like to light my own little candle by summarizing what I

learned about the skills and strategies of the group of basic writers who participated in the project and by drawing what I think are some of the most important implications of these findings.

The ninety-two students who participated in the pilot project were randomly chosen from among those who scored ten or below on the ACT English test. An almost equal number of men and women participated, and the majority (seventy-five percent) were white, middle- or lower-middle class students from all over the state of Ohio -- from prestigious suburban schools and private prep schools as well as from large inner-city schools. During the early days of the quarter, we administered a battery of diagnostic tests, all of which were repeated at the end of the quarter. Since space does not allow a full description of all the tests, a brief description of the tests and a summary of what we learned from them about our students must suffice.

We assumed at the outset of the project that low ACT scores would probably correlate strongly with low reading scores (and indeed that turned out to be the case), but we were nevertheless unprepared for the results which greeted us after we administered the reading test in the McGraw-Hill Basic Skills Series. Our students were invariably slow readers who tended to read at a fixed rate regardless of the difficulty of reading material. Several obviously depended on sub-vocalization. A great many students, in fact, did not read at nearly the rate of 200 words per minute below which reading researchers warn that the student has "very little chance of comprehending."[1]

Reading rates, in fact, ranged from a low of 71 words a minute (1st percentile) to a high of 270 words a minute (49th percentile); the average reading rate was 162.4 words per minute. In order to read for meaning, as Frank Smith reminds us, the student must "keep moving ahead of losses in sensory store and short-term memory."[2] The great majority of our students could not move beyond such losses and hence "missed" a good portion of what they read. Predictably, comprehension scores were equally low -- the average student, who was able to answer correctly only thirteen or fourteen out of thirty questions, fell into the twenty-second percentile; thirty percent of the students scored at the tenth percentile or below.

On a high-school background questionnaire, only three students reported any formal work in reading. Perhaps more importantly, they estimated that they spent no more than seven hours per week on all reading in high school, including both in-class reading and homework. Well over a third reported that, on their own, they read little or none at all.

The low reading scores were reflected in, among other things, the paucity of our students' vocabulary -- the area Mina Shaughnessy has lamented as the "least cultivated field in all of composition research."[3] I would like to offer one concrete example of how what we learned about our students' reading skills and vocabulary helped us in day-to-day teaching. Early in the quarter we gave the students

a mock essay test on one of the readings in their text. One question asked them to "summarize the two main objections" to the plan offered by the author. Seventy-five percent of the students missed the point of this question entirely for one reason: they thought that the word "objection" meant the same as the word "objective." Thus, the essay test served to sharpen our awareness of reading and vocabulary problems as well as to provide students with concrete evidence of their need to develop these skills. Happily, I can happily report that, as a group, the students made remarkable progress in reading during the quarter. I can also report that this experience convinced us that the teacher of writing must automatically be a teacher of reading as well.

What we learned about our students from the reading test was corroborated and expanded by the results of a test designed to measure syntactic maturity. Developed by Roy O'Donnell and Kellogg Hunt and building on Hunt's previous work on syntactic structures of student writers, this test (a passage of thirty-two single-clause sentences or kernels describing the manufacture of aluminum) asks students to combine the short, choppy sentences and rewrite them "in a better way."[4] The quick and simple analysis of student responses requires only figuring the average number of embeddings per principal clause and the mean clause length. These averages can then be compared to those arrived at by Hunt and others who have used the test. Such a comparison revealed that our students fell directly between Hunt's

eighth and tenth graders for both number of embeddings and mean words per clause. More specifically, our students most often opted for strings of linear coordinate clauses rather than for embedded subordinate structures.

Several studies have been done on the use of sentence-combining and similar techniques in building syntactic maturity (the Fall 1976 issue of Research in the Teaching of English contains one such study), but what I wish to emphasize are the diagnostic uses of this test and the syntactic maturity levels that it yields. While I cannot by any means relay all that we gleaned from our study of student responses to this test, I would like to note two important generalizations. Some parts of the "aluminum" passage called for synthesis and organization by the student rewriter, specifically in the form of establishing causal relationships or attributing purposiveness. As a group, our students were markedly unable to supply such elements. This evidence thus underscored sharply for us the need for work on conceptual and inference-gathering skills during the term.

Studying the results of this test also underscored the need for intensive reading instruction, since many of the students clearly did not understand the passage. Hence, while their levels of embedding, mean-clause length and T-unit length closely resembled those of other students (in some cases these measures exceeded those of other students and thus supposedly indicated greater syntactic

maturity), their failure to comprehend the passage yielded a kind of contorted nonsense.

Closely related to the reading and the syntactic maturity test was the most important of our diagnostic tools -- a student writing sample. At the beginning of the quarter, and again at the end, students were asked to "write one paragraph in which you present the major reason your worst teacher was ineffective." These paragraphs were scored by a holistic rating team whose members knew neither the students nor the nature of the pilot project.

In addition to the holistic rating, we did an analytic reading of the paragraphs in which we counted a total of 54 items -- from total number of words, sentences, T-units, subordinate clauses, relative clauses, depth-level of embedding, to common errors such as sentence fragments, comma splices run-ons, misspellings, faulty parallelism, subject-verb agreement, etc. I then fed this data into a computer and used the results to establish a fairly complete and accurate skills profile and to measure change which occurred during the quarter. While it is clearly impossible to discuss the reams of data produced and analyzed in this study, I would like to note some generalizations that held true for our writers.

First, they write laboriously and produce little; in the fifty minutes they were given to write the paragraph, the students produced an average of 136 words -- from a low of 46 to a high of 301. What

embedding the students did came as a rule in short subordinate clauses -- the average sentence length of seventeen words is accounted for by strings of coordinate clauses. Surprisingly, this group wrote few fragments of any kind, though run-on sentence errors ran slightly over one in every eight sentences; errors in agreement occurred with about the same frequency, and spelling errors averaged four per 136-word paragraph. At the beginning of the quarter, the students made a total of 1275 errors, a mean of seventeen per paragraph. In other words, they made one mistake for every eight words written. Many teachers decry what they see as the over-emphasis on error in remedial classes, and their warnings should be heeded to some extent. The teacher who attempts to attack all errors at once will only confuse and discourage the student. And the teacher who teaches grammar as divorced from the student's own writing will no doubt fail to help the student improve. Nevertheless, most remedial writing students are greatly concerned with error and view the teacher's avoidance of it as a general cop-out or a tacit admission of defeat. Furthermore, my computer data indicate that student concern with error is indeed well-founded (I found a .7 correlation between total number of errors and the holistic rating).

I have now outlined what I learned about our basic writers' skills, but I wish also to comment briefly on what I have learned about their writing strategies. Here I am on shakier ground, because a case study of only one remedial writer supports my observations.

Nevertheless, I wish to offer them for what they may be worth in helping us teach basic writers. For two quarters, this particular student spent an hour or so every few weeks in my office working on various writing assignments. In each case, the assignment asked her to develop a topic, write about it, and tape record a running commentary describing what she was doing. Assignments elicited primarily analytic writing -- often I tried to set a task requiring the student to draw inferences from a set of data or from a reading passage. As you can no doubt imagine, these tape recordings make fascinating listening -- and they have revealed several provocative patterns. In all of them, two words recur over and over in varying contexts: easy and safe. In other words, when this student plunges into a writing task, these seem to be her two guiding considerations -- though the options she takes as "easy" and "safe" often seem almost the opposite to me. The pattern created by these two words is related, I think, to two other elements. The first is her general difficulty in drawing inferences. For example, given a paragraph describing Georgia farmers who plant crops according to signs of the moon and asked to explain their system, this student will switch almost immediately to an I-centered, narrative approach; that is, she will say something like "well, what would be easy and good here would be to say how dumb this signs business sounds to me and then tell what I would do." The easy-safe pattern is, I think, also

related to her loss of purpose as the writing progresses. She often begins with an apparently clear idea of what she wants to say, but as she settles on "easy" and "safe" options, her purpose becomes distorted and often lost. These generalizations lead me to believe that we need to pay much closer attention not only to what basic writers do and how they do it but to why they do what they do.

What I have outlined thus far provides only faltering light from a very tiny candle indeed. I have noted that basic writers are poor readers, that their level of syntactic maturity is low, that they are plagued by error, and that the strategies they use in their writing often work against them to compound their difficulties. I would now like to draw what I feel are some major and inescapable implications of these observations. First and most importantly, my study strongly supports the notion that all language skills are related -- that level of reading comprehension is related to complexity of sentence formation (or syntactic maturity), and that both are related to mature, synthetic thought-processes. Our students were all both poor readers and poor writers, and their gains in the two areas certainly paralleled each other. Furthermore, as our students' ability to manipulate syntactic structures improved, so did their ability to draw inferences and make logical connections. In view of the close relationship among

language skills, the contemporary divorce of reading instruction from departments of English is especially lamentable. Especially in the remedial classroom, the reunion of reading and writing instruction is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Closely related to reading theory and research is another implication I wish to draw. On the basis of my experience with remedial students, I feel that teachers should be wary of the temptation to reduce reading levels of college materials on the assumption that only by doing so can the remedial student comprehend the material and thus improve. Frank Smith has taught us that "there is a tradeoff between visual and non-visual information in reading -- the more that is already known 'behind the eyeball,' the less visual information is required to identify a letter, a word, or a meaning from the text."[5] Smith goes on to point out that "a reader who concentrates on words is unlikely to be able to get any sense from the passage that he reads."[6] Smith argues persuasively for the crucial need of the developing reader to take risks, to "guess," or to make errors, and concludes that "the best way to discover the meaning of a difficult passage is to read more of the passage. The best way to identify an unfamiliar word in text is to draw inferences from the rest of the test. The best way to learn the strategies and models for identifying new words 'by analogy' is to read."[7] In light of the evidence Smith provides, the tendency of some remedial programs to reduce the reading level

of all materials to, say, eighth grade, may actually deter students from plunging beyond their current capacities and making mistakes, thereby internalizing new knowledge and sharpening thinking skills.

My study of the results of the syntactic maturity test, the writing sample, and the weekly writing of these remedial writers also leads me to believe that available sentence-combining or other exercises designed to foster syntactic growth must be carefully redesigned for basic writing students. Such revised exercises must (1) elicit student generation of sentences as well as combination of them and (2) foster skills in inference - drawing, abstracting, synthesizing, and conceptualizing. These modified exercises should, of course, then be tested and evaluated in several research projects.

Finally this study has convinced me that we can no longer allow ourselves the luxury, the rationalization, of saying "well, I taught them how to write, but they just didn't learn it." For the truth is that these students can learn if we will teach them rather than some "content material." In only nine weeks of intensive work on writing and reading, these students improved measureably in almost every area. Their counterparts in the control group, however, presented a very different picture. Members of this control group were divided almost equally into those who took the regular Freshman English course and those who took no English at

all. At the end of the quarter, the writing of both these groups had not changed perceptibly -- that is, it matched very closely the writing of the remedial student population at the beginning of the quarter. But -- and here's the rub -- when we compared the control students who took Freshman English with those who took no English, the group who had taken NO English performed better than the group who took the regular course. That is to say, those who took Freshman English wrote less, formed weaker topic sentences, had more errors, and received lower holistic scores than the English group. While the consistency of these results rather surprised me, the overall finding supports my hypothesis: putting remedial writers into traditional courses (the old sink or swim philosophy) not only does them no good; it actually does them harm.

People often say to me that this exhaustive -- and exhausting -- study must surely urge one further implication on me. If these students can't read, can't write, can't trace logical development, shouldn't we despair, give up, just get out of the remedial writing business? I would be the first to acknowledge the special pressures and frustrations of teaching remedial writers. The exhaustion that sets in after hour on hour of intense one-to-one work with students, the despair and disappointment at seeing old errors crop up unexpectedly and new ones seemingly invent themselves, the lack of patience that develops with the need to repeat -- in different and interesting

ways -- the same concept or lesson, the constant challenge of trying to explain highly complex syntactic or grammatical structures without being able to rely on traditional terminology of any kind -- these we all have felt to lesser or greater degrees. But, for me, these pressures and frustrations paled dramatically one day early Winter quarter when one of the pilot project students hurtled out of a crowd and ran toward me waving, bursting with his good news: "Today in Freshman English we got back our first papers, and I got a C+." For that student, and for his teacher, it was all worthwhile.

FOOTNOTES

[1]See Frank Smith's Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 226.

[2]Smith, p. 228.

[3]Mina P. Shaughnessy, "Some Needed Research On Writing," forthcoming in CCC.

[4]This test is described and reproduced in Measures for Research and Evaluation in the English Language Arts, ed. William T. Fagan, Charles A. Cooper, and Julie M. Jensen (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975), pp. 201-202. For additional information, see Kellogg W. Hunt, "Syntax, Science, and Style," Language Arts in the Elementary School: A Forum for Focus, ed. Martha L. King, et al (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1973).

[5]Frank Smith, Psycholinguistics and Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 7.

[6]Frank Smith, Psycholinguistics and Reading, p. 7.

[7]Smith, Psycholinguistics and Reading, p. 189.